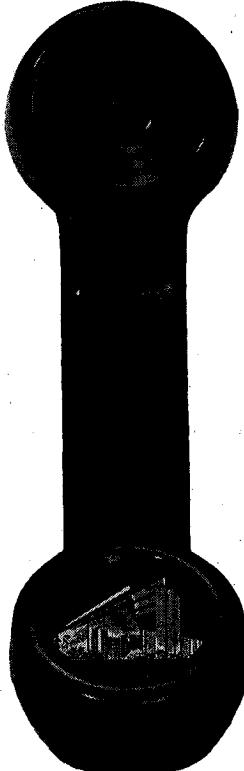


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Chicago: Jack Proval, 360 N. Michigan

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Diners' Club Offices

New York: 10 Columbus Circle, New York, N. Y. 10019, Circle 5-1500; Chicago: 224 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60601, RA 6-2775; Los Angeles: Gateway West, Suite 700, Century City, L.A., Calif. 90067, 277-1500.

Other U. S. Offices:

2273 Kalakaua, Suite 212, Honolulu, Hawaii, 938-408; 420 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach, Florida, JE 2-5589; Penn Sheraton Hotel, Lobby Level, Pittsburgh, Pa., CO 1-1007; Jack Tar Hotel, Van Ness and Geary Streets, San Francisco, Calif., GH 4-8722; 91 Yonge St., Toronto, Canada, EM 3-9545.

Published twelve times yearly by The Diners' Club, Inc., 10 Columbus Circle, New York, N. Y. 10019. Alfred Bloomingdale, President and Chairman of the Board. One dollar paid annual subscription to The Diners' Club Magazine. Publication Office: 2201 Haskell Ave., Lawrence, Kansas. Second class postage paid at Lawrence, Kansas, and at additional mailing offices.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS: SUBSCRIBERS—Please send change of address to The Diners' Club office handling your account. Magazine address change will be made automatically.

POSTMASTER—Please mail form 3579 notices to: Circulation Manager, Diners' Club Magazine, 10 Columbus Circle, New York, New York 10019.

For editorial and advertising information, write or call: Business Manager, Diners' Club Magazine, 10 Columbus Circle, N.Y.C., N.Y. 10019. Circle 5-1500.

They Won't Touch Me

The Short Short / by Jack Ritchie

Fifty-thousand dollars in American money," I said.
"That's the only kind I deal in," Willard said. He was curious. "You're planning to stay in this country?"

"No," I said. "I will undoubtedly go back."
"So why make it American money?"

"American money is good all over the world. I will not have the slightest trouble changing it into our national currency. Or into the currency of any other country, should I so desire."

It had been difficult to see Mr. Willard alone. There were many impediments, many people who were paid to protect him; but if one is persistent, one can always succeed.

Willard lit a cigarette. "Look, I got guys—plenty of guys—who'd do the job for less. And some who'd do it for nothing at all."

"Ah," I said. "But they would be members of your organization. And the possibility that they would be caught is great. And then, of course, they would talk."

He glared at me. "My boys don't talk."

I smiled and said nothing.

He puffed at the cigarette. "So maybe the cops get you, too. And so you talk."

I shrugged. "But I will have nothing to say. The whole incident will be a most regrettable accident."

He snorted. "They'll make you sweat and you'll talk."

"No," I said. "They will not make me sweat."

We were seated in the booth of a bar and he waited while the waiter brought our second drinks and then left.

"Mantell's guarded day and night," he said. "Nobody could get to him."

"I could," I said.

He sipped his drink. "With a high-powered rifle, I suppose?"

I shook my head. "No. Such a thing might perhaps work, but I do not plan to use a high-powered rifle. It would not suit my purpose."

He pressed further. "Where do you figure to get Mantell? In the committee room? At his hotel?"

"No. I have watched several mornings and the procedure appears to be the same. At 9:30 Mantell is brought to the building in which the committee meets. His automobile is the center of a procession of three. The automobiles stop at the curb and Mantell and his guards walk to the building. This sidewalk on which they walk is wide—perhaps 50 feet before it reaches the steps. It is here that I will kill Mantell."

"All right," he said. "How are you going to do it?"

His eyes narrowed when I told him.

"Hell," he said, "you can't get away with anything like that."

I smiled. "But I can."

He drummed his fingers. "I don't know. At a time like this, every finger in the country would point to me."

"But if you wait longer," I said, "it will be too late. I read in your newspaper that . . ."

He glowered at his drink. "You got something there. But still . . ."

"It will be put down as a coincidence," I said. "A most remarkable coincidence. After all, there is absolutely no

connection between you and me. I am a foreigner and I have been in this country for but one year."

He looked up. "And you like to read the newspapers?"

I nodded. "Yes. I like to read your newspapers. And in them I have read that there is this Mr. Mantell who was formerly a member of your organization and is now in prison. But he wishes to make life in prison pleasanter—or perhaps even to be released eventually—and so now he has volunteered to appear before this committee of Congress and tell all he knows. And this 'all' appears to be most damaging to you."

I smiled. "Also in these newspapers I have read many things about you. You are a most important man, though you are not regarded with a great deal of respect. And so I reasoned that in such a case as this Mr. Mantell, you would most certainly be willing to pay \$50,000 to see him dead."

He studied me and seemed to make up his mind. "So you get the \$50,000 and take it back to the old country. What are you going to do with it?"

"I will buy myself a most magnificent automobile," I said. "And I will polish it and constantly reflect that it is mine. Entirely mine."

Several days later, I waited at the curb until I saw the three automobiles pass. Then I brushed the cigarette ashes from my trousers and boots. I started the car and turned into the traffic. A block ahead of me, the three sedans came to a stop before the committee building and their right-hand doors opened.

I stepped hard on the accelerator and the motor roared. A moment later, I swung the wheel to the right and my car jumped the curb.

The group of men on the sidewalk could see what was coming and their eyes widened.

I spun the wheel again, touched my brakes momentarily and let the tires squeal. To the spectator, it would have appeared that my car was out of control.

But it was not.

Mantell's hand went before his face as though to ward off a blow and he shrieked as I hit him.

And then I stepped hard on the brakes and my automobile came to a halt, still on the sidewalk.

I put my head on the steering wheel and managed to moan as the men with the guns came running toward me.

I sat in the jail cell approximately one hour before an attaché from the embassy came to see me.

He sighed. "It was a most regrettable accident. This man Mantell and one detective killed. And two others injured seriously."

I stared at the floor. "I wished to come to a halt, but my foot struck the accelerator instead and I lost control of the car." I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief. "The Americans will execute me."

He shook his head. "No, Peter. They will not even put you in prison. They cannot touch you. The members of the embassy are subject to diplomatic immunity and this extends even to the chauffeurs."

I tried to look surprised, but it was difficult to keep from smiling. Ω